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AUTHOR	Copeland, Evelyn M.
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ABSTRACT

Sixteen non-college-bound high school juniors and seniors met once a week with two to five teachers for a year-long humanities course in which they probed some of man's eternal concerns and achievements in the areas of music, history, drama, philosophy, art, and English. The response from students and teachers alike was generally quite favorable. It encouraged the broadening of such programs to further convey an awareness of beauty and to offer a new opportunity for students to explore their world and themselves. (MF)

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Humanities in the High School

"There Was a Child Went Forth"

Evelyn M. Copeland

As the English consultant for the public schools in Fairfield, Connecticut, Miss Copeland has opportunities to work not only with the teachers but also occasionally to teach classes in elementary and high schools. Here she describes a humanities course for a group *not* going to college.

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or dread, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

—Walt Whitman

ABOUT THREE YEARS ago a high school teacher took a group of culturally deprived pupils just a few miles from their home to visit the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Riding home on the bus, one of the boys said to the teacher, "I didn't know there were so many beautiful things in the whole world."

About three years ago some of us in Fairfield, Connecticut, especially those who had received John Hay transfusions, were beginning to ask, "What are we giving the child that he can look upon with wonder?" "What are we giving him that will become a part of him for 'the day . . . or for many years or stretching cycles of years?'" These questions and their answers have gradually contributed to a humanistic climate in Fairfield. The American Studies course has moved from toddling steps to confidential strides. English classes have studied the art of Picasso's *Guernica* in conjunction with that of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*. "Exploring the Humanities," a course in adult education, is in its second year. But the most exciting excursion we have had into the humanities has been a course for pupils who are not going to college. Last year sixteen juniors and seniors agreed to take part in an experiment that was planned by music, history, drama, art, and English teachers, and an assistant superintendent. The class met once a week with from two to five teachers, a minimum of homework, and no graduation credit. Pupils searched for an answer to the question "What are the humanities and what do they do?" The course began with a filmed lecture by Clifton Fadiman in which he describes the humanities as the record of man's search for answers to the questions that never go out of style—questions about love, hate, suffering, free will, man's relationship to man and God, one's own identity. The lecture is illustrated with sculpture, photography, chamber music, jazz, poetry, philosophy, and the Golden Gate Bridge. The humanities, Fadiman proposes, make us feel a little less lost, a little less confused in a confused world. They help us to feel that we too belong to the family of man.

Part of our experiment was to try a variety of approaches to learning in search of the most successful methods for this kind of class. Therefore, painting was presented in a lecture with colored slides on the history of art with actual paintings compared in group discussions, and in a workshop where pupils solved a problem in design with paper, cutting knives, and paste. The class saw scenes from *Our Town*, especially performed for them by the school's drama workshop. They blocked and read their own scenes and heard the Britannica filmed lecture, *Our Town and Ourselves*. In the meetings devoted to history, the students

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probed Carl Becker's idea of "Every Man His Own Historian" in a case study based on the assassination of President Kennedy. Music ran the gamut from clapping rhythms to a Leonard Bernstein lecture on jazz. The philosophy classes teased such questions as "Who makes the law?" "What is justice?" "Does one ever have an obligation to disobey the law?" They heard Adler's lecture on *Plato's Apology,* and read Socrates' defense of the law. The only books in the course were *Our Town* and *Plato's Dialogue.*

This was our humanities course last year—eight instructors and sixteen pupils turned loose with films, records, paper, paste, guitars, two books, and a few basic questions.

At the last session pupils had a chance to express their reactions to the experiment. Their unpremeditated responses indicated that:

1. Fourteen felt that the topics of the course were of just the right difficulty. One found them too easy. None too difficult.
2. Ten preferred the small group discussions of four or five people; six the large group of sixteen to twenty.
3. Asked what activity they enjoyed most, nine indicated the presentation of scenes from *Our Town*; six, group discussions; two, records and films.
4. Asked what subject they liked best, nine indicated drama; four, art; the rest were evenly distributed among history, music, and philosophy.
5. Eight said that philosophy did the most to make them think; six, history; and two, drama.
6. On a three-point scale of *a little, average,* and *a great deal,* ten felt they had contributed little but only three felt they had gained little. Only one felt that he had contributed a great deal, but six felt that they had gained a great deal.
7. Fourteen would recommend the course to a friend; two would not.
8. Six recommended longer class periods; five, more frequent meetings.
9. Ten recommended homework and credit; six preferred the course as it was without homework or credit.

Responses to "What is your chief reaction to the experiment?" varied from "It was pretty good but parts were too drawn out" to "There should be more time spent to go into detail on the various subjects."

In answer to "What was the chief value of the experiment to you?" one pupil wrote, "It's a chance to discuss things that are not discussed in other classes." One replied, "The experiment had little value to me," another, "It lets you enjoy the things that you've never thought about before," and another, "It set me thinking about myself and other people."

The faculty, encouraged by their own experience and the general response of the pupils, recommended that the course be revised and offered this year twice a week. The revised course concentrates on enjoying the humanities. Its purpose is not to give a course, even a partial course, in philosophy or art or music or drama. Rather, each class meeting is an individual experience in some aspect of the humanities, hopefully a pleasurable experience that these pupils might otherwise never have.

Experience has taught us to work from the present to the past, from the personal to the general, not from a lecture on the history of art to an exercise in design but from scissors, water colors and clay to a curiosity about art. Experience has taught us not to ask, "Do the humanities do what Fadiman says they do?" but rather to ask, "Why do we sing folk songs when our parents sang the blues?" Experience has taught us that pupils learn best when they have a chance in small groups to talk a problem out among themselves; they respond enthusiastical-

ly when they meet the arts in the theater, the art gallery, and the concert hall.

The current issue of *The English Leaflet* includes an overview of nearly sixty humanities programs in the country. No two are alike. What is taught seems not to be important in itself. How it is taught may take almost any form. But what happens when pupils come head on with the humanities *is* important. When pupils discover some relation between themselves and what they are studying, between school and the outside world, between history and music, or literature and architecture, between who they are and who they are going to be, something does happen.

This year we are taking our humanities class out of the classroom more than we did last year. Pupils meet in the art room, in the music center, and on the stage. We plan to take them to the Yale Art Gallery and Rare Book Library, to an opera in New York, and to the Stratford production of the *Taming of the Shrew* next spring because we remember

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> And that object became part of him. . . .

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